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AUTHOR Natoli, Joseph P.
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ABSTRACT

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"QUALITATIVE METHODS AND A PHENOMENOLOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE IN LIBRARY RESEARCH"

Joseph P. Natoli, Ph.D.
Head, Reference and Bibliography
Z. Smith Reynolds Library
Wake Forest University

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A phenomenological approach to library research utilizing qualitative research methods is contrasted to a positivist-behaviorist approach utilizing quantitative methods. Psychological understanding of a situation attained by means of accurate description, and subjectivity and associated intentionality are presented as part of the phenomenological perspective. Criticism presented in the light of the phenomenological approach is made of various aspects of theory and hypothesis formulation, sampling and observation. The argument here is for the use of an appropriate research orientation in regard to those aspects of librarianship which cannot be treated justly according to the positivist-behaviorist model.

"Qualitative Methods and a Phenomenological Perspective in Library Research"

Joseph P. Natoli
Z. Smith Reynolds Library
Wake Forest University

> ...while sectarian and partisan faiths are based on personal choice or temperament and divide men, scientific procedure unites men in something nobly devoid of all pettiness. Because it requires detachment, disinterest, it is the finest flower and test of a liberal civilization.[1]

Scientific procedure involving empirical research and a quantitative methodology leads to scientific truth. Social science research, within which library science fits itself, is based on the procedures of the natural sciences. Bundy's and Wasserman's Reader in Research Methods for Librarianship[2] is primarily devoted to research based on behavioralism, itself derived from a positivist view in which "...facts or causes of social phenomena..." are pursued "...with little regard for the subjective states of individuals."[3] Although this work was published in 1970, is a basic text in library school courses, and represents the research orientation of the library field as a whole, its foundation, behavioralism, had already been seriously challenged by phenomenology.[4] Phenomenology reintroduces human consciousness, man's own perceptions, and strives to generate psychological understanding rather than establish scientific truth.

It seems fitting that human consciousness be considered in research in which man is concerned. And, since librarianship has very much to do with the "human factor," with subjectivity, in the form of librarian and patron and administrator, it is conceivable that its problems and attendant research would be well served by a phenomenological approach. Scientific procedure may unite men by formulating laws based on aggregate behavior, but since it fails to take into account consciousness, human perceptions, it can hardly be deemed "...the finest flower and test of a li-

beral civilization." History testifies to the allure of a rigorous method which promises to go beyond "...sectarian and partisan faiths...based on personal choice or temperament... ." History also testifies to the fact that to go beyond such is to go beyond a good deal that is essentially human.[5] There is no danger of losing sight of the human when nature is solely involved. Research in librarianship, however, cannot be modeled completely on such an approach, not without producing conclusions far removed from the reality of librarianship as readily perceived by every librarian in the field. Nor can such an approach take into account the diverse nature of librarianship itself, one in which the purely technical-objective exists side by side with the human-subjective, in which the purely clerical exists side by side with the conceptual, the bureaucratic with the professional. Quantitative statistical methods can only be used in those areas in which a human perception of a situation is not a factor. Such areas seem few, and like a history of events completely divorced from human perceptions, human bias, in effect an objective account of facts no human has ever perceived, equally chimerical.

In a study of the ideology of a mental hospital and "...the perspectives and concerns of lower-level personnel, or attendants...," Taylor discovered that the perceptions of attendants regarding their job and the mental hospital were in contradiction to the stated aims of the hospital.[6] The attendants directed themselves to maintaining acceptable appearances and were wary of outside scrutiny. Only Taylor's focus on the attendants' own Lebenswelt, human life-world, enabled him to discern intentions which determined behavior. And these intentions invariably led to behavior which was either opposed to the hospital's goals or took no account of them. For the empirically oriented behaviorist, a person's consciousness of a situation has little import; how one actually behaves, what one actually does, is clear and verifiable. Taylor discovered that attendants were adamantly opposed to washing floors although such was part of their job. They had inmates do the job while they made sure that it would appear they themselves had done the work. And, in spite of the fact that other routine jobs like feeding were performed, the overall view the attendants held regarding the inmates affected their actions and worked against

any assistance they seemed to be giving. Consciousness of one's situation was indeed a more serious consideration than behavior observed at any particular time.

Rather than search for causes of human behavior or reduce subjectively invested library operations to wholly objectifiable situations, the phenomenologically oriented researcher attempts to understand the situation, to describe it as it is perceived by those involved. Preconceptions based on normative values and beliefs are "bracketed," or held in abeyance. And the situation may be described by actual participant observation, covert or overt, or by personal oral or written accounts from those involved. If the researcher offers no boundaries to what is elicited, as do questionnaires and surveys, buts sets himself to see things from the point of view of those involved, he is best able to describe and understand what is actually taking place. These results, in turn, enable the researcher to discern problems such as discrepancies between declared objectives or envisioned ideals and actuality. They also enable him to define solutions which can be more readily assimilated within the situation as it exists than those imposed from without and "deduced" from supposedly generally applicable laws of human behavior.

When the phenomenologist de-emphasizes scientific method and its search for scientific truth and emphasizes individual phenomenal experiences, he is replacing a traditional view that man is subsumed within an objective universe with one in which he "...is the living center of his world from which its intentional meanings emanate."[7] In the former case, laws applicable to a study of the naturalistic universe are transferred to a study of man as if he were merely an object amid objects. In this manner, human subjectivity is denied. The phenomenologist believes that the abstract methods of science can give us some knowledge of the natural universe but that "...its objective results must be finally fitted into this (human life-world) world horizon."[8] The transference of scientific law to the human life-world only has validity if consciousness and intentionality are abolished. The stimulus-response frame of reference of the behaviorist is akin to the natural scientist's cause and effect and supposedly replaces human intentionality. Man responds automatically, reflexively, to certain stimuli in the physical environment; he is purely a function

of that environment and his behavior totally explicable in terms of it. Once forces within the environment are defined, causes discovered, a relationship with the binding force of scientific law is presumed to exist between those forces and individual or societal behavior.

Since a library is defined as an organization, a social unit "...oriented toward the pursuit of specific goals...," it is supposedly affected by certain forces, its operations are comprehensible in terms of discoverable causal relationships, as are its problems and possible solutions.[9] Operations are susceptible to scientific analyses; human involvement is an objective factor within a totally objective situation and also susceptible to scientific analysis. While all of this provides the basis of much research in librarianship, it assumes various guises such as systems analysis, content analysis, behavioral objectives and the like. So far even discussions of various qualitative methods such as personal documents, interviewing and participant observation have been presented within a naturalistic rather than phenomenological perspective, and have therefore been presented with the reservations of a perspective which finds the human-subjective an intrusive factor in the pursuit of scientific truth.[10] But there is a phenomenological turn in sociology "...which has become increasingly influential in recent years..." although the positivist reductionist ideal is "...still firmly entrenched in the tribal beliefs and practices of the American sociological profession."[11] And, since librarianship has for some time now been trying to establish its social science credentials, it is not surprising to discover that it would confine itself in its notions of research to what has been fully sanctioned by both mainstream tradition and practice.

I should like to discuss various stages in the research process, distinguishing phenomenologically based qualitative methods from the more widely accepted quantitative methods of a positivist-behaviorist approach. I consider this essay necessarily preliminary and abstract but expect to present an illustrative sample research study in a future essay.[12]

The "bracketing" of traditional systematic preconceptions which is a necessary component of a phenomenological approach runs counter to the recommended use of con-

ceptual models for library research.[13] Theories selected "...for their logical and operational properties rather than for their congruence with common sense..." automatically structure reality according to implicit values.[14] An overriding theory determines attitudes,and the researcher's intentions not surprisingly find their objects. Common-sense or the "wisdom of immediate experience," the perceptions of the human life-world are set aside by the researcher with a systematic theory in mind.

> ...where common-sense concepts do not order experience in the ways required by systematic theory, then new terms must be invented or adopted.[15]

Rather than forcing the meanings of the human life-world within "...the more simplified pattern of some a priori theory disguised by the term empiricism...," or discarding them, as does Thompson, the phenomenologist considers his central task to be "...that of describing and of understanding, so far as possible, the concrete phenomena of the Lebenswelt."[16] Since people perceive reality in accordance with their intentions, they naturally perceive the same thing differently. And since intentions change, they also perceive the same thing differently at different times. To achieve full descriptive understanding of a situation as perceived by those involved, a researcher must suspend his own judgements while at the same time not identifying any one perception with the eventual results of his study. Thus, while common-sense concepts and perceptions are not discarded by fiat of theory, they are also not automatically accepted as conducive to psychological understanding of a situation.

Thompson believes that theory will protect us from the tyranny of common-sense notions and he asks the researcher to protect himself with an a priori notion. In consequence, everything escapes but what theory predisposes the researcher to see. The phenomenologist goes, in Husserl's words, "to the things themselves"and reserves his analysis for the post-fieldwork stage. Husserl believed that phenomenology would eventually provide a rigorous foundation for all disciplines, that it was a relevant antecedent to any future theorizing.[17] In the present, however, phenomenological research has disclosed a discrepancy between immediate experience and our expectations based on traditional assumptions.

In regard to the formulation of an hypothesis, the phenomenological researcher

does not state it and then seek to prove or disprove it. The question asked already assumes the answer. The relevant distinction here is that while there are certain ways in which the researcher can structure the results of his investigation, hypotheses emerging from what is described, this structuring is not allowed to anticipate results. It can only take place at the post-fieldwork stage. The problems envisioned by Goode and Hatt, i.e., without an hypothesis "...research is unfocused, a random empirical wandering..." whose "...results cannot even be stated as facts with a clear meaning...," are resolved by the phenomenologist's view of intention.[18] Consciousness of a particular situation means that the perceiver is joined to what is perceived by his own intentions. This is an inherent, essential structuring of reality and while providing focus does not determine the researcher in the same fashion as does an explicit hypothesis whose solution or answer is already contemplated and contemplated in quantifiable terms. Like the theory from which it frequently emerges, the hypothesis is a means to discern causal relationships, to isolate social forces. The hypothesis is presented because the validity of such social forces and their uniform effect on man and society are accepted. Not only moral judgements but all affective matters--beauty, pain, faith, suffering, hope, love ,pity, ambition etc., are unsuitable because of the lack of any empirical referent other than phenomenal experience itself. Even the reductionist approach of the behaviorist, that motivation, for instance, is a function of the hypothalamic gland, has not been able to bring fully subjective matters into the realm of social research.

Since a phenomenological perspective to research involves individual phenomenal experiences, common sampling procedures in which a representative group is selected for study are replaced by studies whose proposed descriptions of situations refer only to what has actually been studied. Sampling procedures can be traced to a positivistic belief in the universal applicability of certain social phenomena to human behavior. While the effect of such social phenomena on an individual may resgister variously, they nonetheless are observable as operating on man-in-the-aggregate. Since the scientifically oriented researcher pursues causes which are only displayed within the "social aggregate," sampling techniques whether random, purposive, stra-

tified, quota, multistage, convenience or self-selected, insure that the integrity of the social aggregate is preserved. Measures are taken, in fact, to prevent what is particular from skewing the entire study.

Participant observation is a qualitative method which is fully sanctioned by by a phenomenological perspective. It has been half-heartedly advocated by those pursuing scientific truth, although it violates the traditional role of the neutral scientific observer. The use of personal documents--diaries, letters, autobiographies, as well as unstructured interviewing are based on an interest in conscious experience. Our knowledge of the world very much depends on how we perceive it; the world and our perceptions emerge from the total intentional orientation of our consciousness. Consciousness and accompanying intentionality must be considered active agents in the acquiring of knowledge. Behavior is more fitting for scientific research; it is demonstrable, objective and presumably controllable, while consciousness seems a "black box." For the objectively oriented researcher to accept subjective accounts either through personal documents, literature or unstructured interviewing, he must assume that consciousness can be objectified or at least subsumed within the objective. The phenomenologist feels no need to objectify the subjective, sees the impossibility of such a task, and boldy asserts that the human life-world, based on phenomenal experiences, "...is quite distinct from the abstract, univocal, non-relative spaces of sciences... ."[19] The human life-world cannot be reduced to the realms of science.

> ...speaking noetically we may conclude that our knowledge of the scientific universe has been derived by abstraction from the Lebenswelt, but speaking ontologically that the latter has developed historically from the former.[20]

What a person says therefore regarding his own perceptions of a situation is not peripheral or subsidiary because it is non-objective, but is of vital importance since it is human intentionality which ultimately defines and creates the world in which humans live. And although the things of this world exist in their own right and natural science has analyzed them, they must be perceived by man and incorporated within his own life-world to have any real existence for man.

> Man is a moving system of intentions which pervade the things and agencies with which he interacts and give them meaning...His innermost private intentions, by which he really lives, open into an ultimate world horizon, embracing everything in the past and present, and all that can be in the future.[12]

Once a social science researcher using a rigidly scientific method, one that hopefully the natural scientist will recognize as legitimate, establishes a causal relationship, he is presumably able to alter the relationship to his own purposes. If salary for instance determines motivation, an increase in one will affect an increase in the other. I suppose this implicit control, from Comte onward, has been an attractive part of the positivist's search for socially determining factors. To suggest that man, in part, is suffering from the application of a methodology foreign to his own subjective nature, is to suggest that he is elusive, that the laws and methods we apply to nature are at once more and less than needed, that the vision of abstracting systematic meaning from man and his society is ultimately romantic and not romantic enough.

NOTES

1
Cohen, Morris R. An Introduction to Logic and Scientific Method (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), p.403.

2
Bogdan, Robert and Steven J. Taylor. Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975), p.2. This work is actually a manual for those wishing to apply qualitative methods. It discusses in detailed fashion what I only identify. My purpose is to generally describe an approach which is for the most part ignored in library research in contrast to one which is heavily used but whose sources are not often clearly understood.

3
Bundy, Mary Lee and Paul Wasserman. (Washington, D.C.: NCR, 1970).

4
Symposium on behaviorism and phenomenology was held in 1963 at Rice University. The results were published in T.W. Wann's Behaviorism and Phenomenology: Contrasting Bases for Modern Psychology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964). In his essay, "Reconciliation of Behaviorism and Phenomenology," Willard Day states that the results of that symposium were that Behaviorism "...is essentially an unproductive and unrealistic framework within which to pursue psychological research." In Theories in Contemporary Psychology. Eds. M. Marx and F. Goodson (New York: Macmillan, 1976), p.589.

5
See Theodore Roszak "The Myth of Objective Consciousness," in his The Making of A Counter Culture (New York: Anchor, 1968), 205-238. See also Rene Dubos, The Dreams of Reason (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1961); Jacques Barsun, Science: The Glorious Entertainment (New York : Harper and Row,1964); Arthur Koestler, The Ghost in the Machine (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

6
Taylor, Steven J. "Doin' A Job," in Bogdan and Taylor, p.197.

7
Wild, John, "Man and His Life-World," in For Roman Ingarden: Nine Essays in Phenomenology. Ed. A. Tymieniecka (Gravenhage: M. Nijhoff, 1959), p.95.

8
Ibid., p.107.

9
Etzioni, Amitai. Modern Organizations (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p.143.

10
See Severyn Bruyn, "The Methodology of Participant Observation," in Bundy and Wasserman, pp.172-185.

11
Roche, Maurice. Phenomenology, Language and the Social Sciences (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p.315.

12
Not all research in the library field puts aside psychological understanding for the promise of scientific truth. A bibliography of studies which go directly "to the things," to a theory-free description of the library world, would be extremely worthwhile. However, the "Letters" section of many library journals are more pertinent in a phenomenological approach than are articles hoping to establish one scientific truth deduced from another.

13
See Bundy and Wasserman, p.87.

14
Thompson, James D. "Modern Approaches to Theory in Administration," in Bundy and Wasserman, p.93.

15
Ibid., p.93.

16
Wild, p.91.

17
See Marvin Faber, The Aims of Phenomenology. (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp.1-17.

18
Goode, William J. and Paul K. Hatt, "Basic Elements of the Scientific Methods," in Bundy and Wasserman, p.53.

19
Wild, p.98.

20
Ibid., p.98.

21
Ibid., p.95